

Free Lunch: Dining at Public Expense in Classical Athens

Socrates, in Plato's Apology, asked upon conviction by the jury, to name a punishment, proposed he be maintained for life at public expense in the prytaneum, an honor accorded public benefactors (athletes, generals - like Pericles, the oldest living descendents of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristeion, and those of the orator Demosthenes. The jury, provoked, voted for the death penalty, by a larger margin than they had voted for conviction. Socrates' last meal was at public expense, but included hemlock.

Where did you get free meals in classical Athens? The Agora, originally an open space for discussion, a kind of civic center, became a market-place, since sellers set up where people congregated. In 1931 the American School of Classical Studies began excavating the various overlapping layers of structures in the agora. In 1972, Rotroff began excavating newly acquired land just north of the railroad tracks, on the foundation of a colonnaded building which inscriptions (and later references) showed to have been the Royal Stoa, office of the King Archon. Her digging was actually in the Roman remains in the backyard of the Stoa. Under the Roman building was a pit 2 yards across and 2 yards deep, with a lot of 5th century BC pottery of high quality. The results of her 20 years excavating with John Oakley have just been published.

The questions that arose immediately: Why were the pots so badly broken? What foods and meals were eaten from them? What was the pit for? The date was established quickly by the Attic red-figure pottery types (the most studied pottery in the world): the "Leningrad painter" represented on one crater worked around 450-460 and stamped decorations on the interior bottoms must be later than 450; one large mixing bowl is from 430, so the pit was used about 460-430 BC. The site must not have been a pottery workshop, because too many different artists are represented, and there was too much pottery of too high a quality for a household dump.

The tip-off was the symbol for public property (demosion) on two thirds of the finds; some or all of the pots were thus marked to keep people from carrying them off from meals at public dining rooms. Literary sources mention various such places: Thesmophorion, Prytaneum, Prytanea, but the texts are garbled and the sites are probably the Prytanikon (or Tholos), for the currently serving prytany; the Themotheteion, where the archons ate; and the Prytaneion, reserved for special honorees.

The Prytaneion was ritzy, a place you had to have done something fancy to warrant, and, although it has not yet been found, it was between the agora and the north slope of the Acropolis, and therefore far from the railroad site.

The Prytanikon (a tholos) was in the agora, but round buildings (like the early huts) are rare and this one has already been identified elsewhere. The steering committee (fifty men) of the Council (Boule) ate together, perhaps so that men with no other mutual social contact could work together more easily. The Tholos was built around 470, perhaps the earliest date for democratic officials, a counterpart to the aristocratic custom of dining together. These were no fancy symposia with couches (a luxury imported from the east), because fifty people wouldn't fit into the Tholos on couches. Farmers sat at tables to eat, so maybe, as an expression of Athenian democracy, these prytaneis also sat to eat.

Was the site of the pit, then the Thesmotheteion, for the 6 junior archons and occasionally for all nine? There are references to them eating in a Stoa and the Royal Stoa was rebuilt around 460. Did they actually eat in the Royal Stoa or in some nearby building? The comic playwright, Aristophanes, in Ecclesiazusai mentions where certain groups were supposed to go to eat (including the Royal Stoa), but we don't know whether this was just a joke.

Why are the pots shattered into so many small pieces? The historian Thucydides says that in 426 a great earthquake held the Spartans off from invading Attica and great damage was done to various buildings. The pots may have been on a wooden shelf that crashed down in the mud-brick building.

What were the meals of the nine annual archons (and one secretary) like? Many Athenians would have had the chance to be archon, so this constituted a slight pay, enabling the poor to serve in the unpaid office. A Greek dinner mentioned in Egypt included a pint of wine, wheat bread, eggs, cheese, dried fish, and a kind of baklavah. For wine drinking there was always a large bowl for mixing water and wine, a pitcher for dipping out the drinks, and cups. There were many unpainted (therefore cheaper) drinking cups in the pit. The pitchers were also cheap, unglazed, but the craters were fancier (big and painted).

Why were there so many broken craters (about 70) in proportion to cups (about 1000) found in a thirty-five year deposit, with no more than 15 people at the meals? The craters may have been gifts from archons, commemorating an archon's big year (costing about 1 or 2 days wages for a skilled laborer). There seem to have been some sets (crater, small mixing bowl, oil flask - including a batch by the painter Hermonax). Sixth century inscriptions from Sigeion show people gave pots as gifts to public dining halls and a word-list mentioning Zeus Eleutherios (the Liberator) says that Athenians dedicated mixing bowls near the Royal Stoa to commemorate the god's help in driving out the Persians in 480.

Wine used at public halls was generally the local vintage (cheaper), but that would be in wineskins, so the presence of some amphora fragments in the pit (including some from Chios, the best imported wine) suggests some individual generosity.

Bread was crucial, about seventy percent of the diet. Grain was always provided to the soldiers, while anything else was lumped together as "everything else". Various plates and tiny bowls in the deposit would have been right for fish, garlic, and vegetables. Meat was a very small part of the ancient diet, expensive because hard to raise in a dry country and thus considered a luxury, in fact degenerate. Meat was often shared at sacrifices. Stewpots and shish-kabob braziers were found in the deposit, so meat must have been served.

This deposit shows not the aristocrats of ancient Athens but the little people.